

Trainer Talk

Metaphorically Speaking...with Kathy Johnson

I am currently teaching a man who is strangely unaware of his place in the arena. Do you have any good teaching strategies on cross-roads or circulation places?

—*Amy from England.*

Amy,

Metaphors can be a good way to teach riders who learn kinesthetically or “by feel.” It sometimes works well for visual learners, too, if you are relating what they feel and see to something they have seen before. Metaphors are often not as effective for auditory learners, who listen to “tapes” in their heads.

Knowing a student’s ideal learning style helps in teaching. If your rider is kinesthetic and learns best by feel, he will relate a metaphor to something he has felt before. If the rider has never felt the other end of the metaphor, it won’t work.

For instance, a person who has never held a bird in his hand might not get the analogy of holding the reins like little birds he should neither crush nor let go. Children might understand how riding a horse is something like riding a bicycle, but they won’t understand how it is like driving a car. Most adults who drive respond very well to car metaphors.

Let’s use that. Think of the horse’s poll as the hood ornament of a vehicle. Just as a driver would line up his hood ornament parallel with the centerline of the road, he must line up the horse’s poll with the ‘line’ he wants the horse to follow. Looking down is like checking the gauges in the car. A driver might let his eyes flicker down occasionally to check his speed, his oil pressure or his gas gauge, but he must look right back up to check out the windshield. He should never drop his head and stare down at the gauges or he may crash.

Likewise, a rider should keep half an eye on the hood ornament of the horse so he knows which way it is going, but he should constantly be looking up and out the windshield to watch for traffic, other horses, and “road signs” - dressage letters.

Gauging pace: Looking out their windshields, most drivers look two cars ahead. The faster they drive, the farther ahead they must look or they will not have stopping room. In riding, look three horse lengths ahead at the walk, six horse lengths ahead in the trot, and nine horse lengths ahead in the canter. Riders must always stay at least one horse length away from other horses. Tailgating is dangerous, as is sideswiping.

Overtaking another car (horse): never pass on the shoulder of the road. The rail is the guard rail and the car could get trapped if the other vehicle swerved. Always pass on the inside. Better yet, cut across the arena.

Facing on-coming traffic: just as in driving in America, stay in the right lane. This will always put you left hand to left hand with oncoming riders. You can add the exceptions later.

Avoid student drivers. If a beginner is milling around obviously without steering, avoid a collision by staying as far away as possible. The better drivers must watch out for the learners. Here in Colorado, a lot of people ski, so skiers all understand the metaphor of watching out for the “bunnies,” as they call beginners.

I would also teach this rider Sally Swift’s “hard eyes” and “soft eyes,” or how to use peripheral vision. The exercise used in Centered Riding is for the trainer to stand by the horse’s shoulder. Ask the rider to note where you are standing. Tell him to note when he can’t see you any more. Have the rider pick a point straight ahead on the wall and stare at it. These are hard eyes. Then move back toward the horse’s tail. He will usually say he can’t see you when you are near the horse’s hip.

Now, repeat the exercise, telling him to



Writer Kathy King Johnson and her Friesian gelding, Bram.

keep his head straight, but let his eyes flicker back and forth, “soft eyes.” He will usually say he can’t see you when you are somewhere past the horse’s tail. This exercise helps people understand how to use their range of vision when riding. If they are riding around with a large group of riders, they need to keep soft eyes. If they are headed someplace specific, like over a jump or over a bridge the horse doesn’t want to cross, they need to use “hard eyes.”

It is important when using hard eyes to look further ahead than the place the rider wants to go. I explain this like breaking boards in karate. If we are going to punch the board, we aim our blow at the other side of the board, not at the board. The riders should look well past the jumps or well past the obstacles, not down at them. Then their whole body language is directed toward pushing the horse past the point of resistance, not at it.

I hope that helps. I suspect the problem is in the rider’s visual awareness and focus. As he becomes more comfortable on the horse, it will improve. Teach him simple school figure and letters early when there are no other horses in the arena: change of rein MXK, HXF, turn across the arena at B and E, down centerline at A and C. Even at the walk, this will help him learn his road signs.

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